

Hobbies

Computers bring a big change to mint's coin distribution

By Roger Boye

Today's column answers more mail from Chicago Tribune readers.

Q—The letter you ran from G.B. of Chicago concerning [buying coins from] the United States Mint brought back bitter memories. Last May my husband ordered some 1990 proof sets. Eventually, we followed up with three letters and two phone calls (we were told that our coins were shipped to someone in Mississippi), and I then filed a claim with

the Illinois attorney general, whose office sent two letters on our behalf. In mid-December we received our proof sets by certified mail. What a nightmare!

L.E., Peru

A—A decade ago, stories like yours sometimes seemed to be the rule rather than the exception. In the past several years, mint officials have made progress by investing in a new computer system and opening a customer service center in Lanham, Md. Uncle Sam is attempting to better serve the nearly three million

collectors on its mailing list, but there still are bugs in the system.

Q—Is it possible to buy American Eagle silver and gold coins from the government or must we go through a coin dealer? Also, do you think silver prices have hit bottom?

J.N., Chicago

A—The United States Mint sells uncirculated Eagle coins to wholesale distributors, who in turn send them to banks, coin dealers and other retailers for sale to precious-metal investors. However, you can buy from the gov-

ernment proof Eagle coins, which are prized as collectibles because of their superior finish. Proof Eagles dated 1991 probably will go on sale in late summer. (To get your name the mailing list for coin brochures and order forms, write to the United States Mint, 10001 Aerospace Drive, Lanham, Md. 20706.)

I don't try to predict silver prices. Earlier this year, silver traded for about \$3.50 an ounce—its lowest price since January 1974—and many investors apparently believe it is a good time to buy. The United States Mint already has sold about four million troy ounces of silver Eagles in 1991, compared with 7.2 million ounces for all of last year.

Q—Does the government still make half dollars? I haven't received one in change for years.

P.L., Wheaton

A—During the past two decades, Kennedy half dollars have been made for circulation in every year except 1970 and 1987. (Halves produced in 1975 were dated either 1974 or 1776-1976.) Yet the coins seldom are used, in part because many vending machines won't accept half dollars and because consumers find them inconvenient. Some specialists believe the denomination should be eliminated from the U.S. monetary system.

Q—Is there any value to coins without dates? We have several old nickels, dimes and quarters with the years worn away.

A.S., Evanston

A—Such coins normally aren't collectible, but you can sell the dimes and quarters for their silver content. Also, some dealers advertising in *Coin World* and elsewhere will pay about 10 cents each for dateless buffalo nickels.